



UNDER DEVELOPMENT

Taking advantage of some rare time away from the office, David Robinson draws inspiration from a two-year-old to help deal with a selection of custards who remind him of nothing so much as Mr Men

At the end of last year's holiday I swore that I was going to try to take things easier, specifically by not working on Friday afternoons unless customers' needs completely required it. That was a failure, and I never even managed one afternoon off. This year I swore to try even harder. The first Friday back I finished work at 8pm and the second I got home at 9pm. Since then, though, I've managed three Friday afternoons in the garden.

The problem is that we're busier than ever. A couple of years ago, when the economy was strong, getting new business was quite hard; now it's cooled down a bit and customers are much more eager to improve their efficiency and want software to help with that.

I've also decided to review my naming strategy. When I started this column, I never expected it to last 20 years and recklessly used my own name. This has had no major repercussions for me personally but, as all 'custard' stories are firmly rooted in fact, I have to be extremely careful not to upset the hand that feeds me by embarrassing customers in public. So, to protect the guilty, Richard from Guildford, for example, becomes Wally from Wigan (even if he is a Dick). But after all this time I've started running out of names – and there's always the possibility that a real Wally thinks I was writing about him, even though Dick was to blame. Oh, what a tangled web we weave!

So I got the idea for a different method from my grandson who's two and, poor soul, covered in chicken pox. He loves a good story and, at the risk of being boastful, I'm not bad at telling them. Current favourite is *Three Billy Goats Gruff*; if you mix them all together and add in the Troll you've got something resembling Effing Jeff, which is OK for one character but won't get us very far with the rest. Second favourite is Roger Hargreaves' excellent series of *Mr Men* books. They're just like the film *Reservoir Dogs*, where the criminals hide their real identities behind names such as Mr White and Mr Blue. I have no end of candidates for Mr Messy, Mr Silly,



Mr Impossible, Mr Muddle and all their friends – especially Mr Muddle.

MR MESSY

Having the time for Friday afternoons off would be so much easier without Mr Messy. This month, for instance, one of Mr Messy's lieutenants, based in France, decided that a couple of his staff were in need of training on our warehousing software and, in a mountain and Muhammad moment, it was decided that they would come to our office where, in a couple of days out of the work environment and away from distractions, we would be able to cover the necessary subjects, including a new way of handling goods in and out using barcodes. Then Mr Messy heard about the trip and decreed that it should not be done at our office but at the UK office in Birmingham.

The next thing I hear (not from Mr Messy, mind you) is that he's added two more staff to the 'course' and a couple from the Glasgow branch. And while we're at it, why not throw in four from head office just to make it all worthwhile? Oh,

and a visiting Japanese supplier as well. You might well be thinking, "What's Robbo making a fuss for? It's the same subject, just a few more people listening." Would that it were that simple.

In practice what happens is that the training flow gets disrupted by questions. The more bodies you're dealing with, the more varied – and sometimes more ludicrous – the questions. Some people like to leave all questions to the end. I don't, because if you deal with them as they arise you don't have to spend ages re-establishing the context and the issues are fresh in people's minds. Doing it this way may disrupt the proceedings, but I think it's the lesser of two evils. What's more, although they all use the same software, each branch has a different focus due to the different kinds of customers they have.

Anyway, thanks to Mr Messy, what should have been two very pleasant days with two Continental cousins has turned into a stressful bun-fight. The chances of covering all the necessary material in just two days is now less than zero. Ah

well, the customer is always right, I suppose.

MR MUDDLE

We've been constructing a sales and stock control system for Mr Muddle's business, which deals in perishable goods. Can't you do that with Sage, I hear you ask? Not the way Mr Muddle's pricing structure works you can't; it needs Keef's multi-faceted Price Matrix that can deal with any pricing oddity I've ever come across.

The system was close to going live and they'd been adding lots of products to the stock file. I stress to custards time and again that if they want a change or addition to a system they should both request it in writing (that way I don't forget about it and it also, in theory, forces them to think it through) and express clearly what it is they want.

I received an email from Mr Muddle that said: "Now that we have added many stock items, it would help us a lot if you could do a report that would help us." I phoned Mr Muddle to see if there was part of the message missing after the full stop, but that was it – in its entirety. The only thing he wished to add to was, "I'm sure you know what I mean". Next stop Yellow Pages, Clairvoyants section.

MR UPPITY

A significant part of our income comes from support. We have three people who don't do much else and, with all the fixed costs, a lot of the support is done under contract. Mrs R sent a contract for renewal to Mr Uppity, who sent it back declining to renew it. Concerned our service may be deficient, we asked why. "Because your service is rubbish – you never answer our questions," he replied.

We checked the service logs and found that there had been no issues to deal with at all. So Mrs R rang Mr Uppity and told him. "That's only because we don't know what questions to ask," he replied. ☐

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